PITCOM at 25

A short history of the

Parliamentary Information Technology Committee

An Associate Parliamentary Group

25th Anniversary Celebration
1981– 2006

Contents

Parliamentary Information Technology Committee

The Parliamentary Information Technology Committee (PITCOM) is an Associate Parliamentary Group, included in the House of Commons list of approved all-party groups. It was formed in January 1981 by Members of both Houses of Parliament and members of the computing, communications and information-handling industries. Its purpose is:

1. To promote among members of both Houses of Parliament an informed awareness of the social and economic impact of information and communication technology developments and policies.

2. To analyse, in consultation with industry, current and future problems in the field of information and computer technologies.

3. To provide a meeting place for informal, off-the-record exchanges of information and opinions on subjects of mutual concern between Members of Parliament, their advisers and members of the computing, communications and information-handling industries.

It holds evening meetings in a Committee Room of the House of Commons and conferences on the policy implications of new technologies; study tours for Parliamentary members; receptions and an annual dinner in the House of Lords.

Who's Who in PITCOM

Chairman:	Andrew Miller MP
Vice Chairman:	Margaret Moran MP
Vice Chairman:	Ian Taylor MBE MP
Hon. Treasurer:	Lord Harris of Haringey
Hon. Secretary:	Roger Gale MP
Financial Executive:	John O'Sullivan
Communications Officer:	Dr. Elizabeth Bacon
Programme Officer:	Charles Hughes
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When PITCOM was set up 25 years ago the there were far fewer All Party Groups within Parliament and certainly, with the exception of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee from whom we were spawned, little was done by either House to help promote or work with the emerging technologies. Remember, this was before Moore's Law was common parlance and few Parliamentarians would have understood just how the now ubiquitous silicon chip was about to affect the every day lives of their constituents. When I first came into Parliament in 1992 I remember one of our elder statesmen saying "MPs don't need computers!" He is now a regular user along with all but a handful. Even the most Luddite of our colleagues are, albeit perhaps unwittingly, regular users of very sophisticated devices.

PITCOM is no longer an All Party Group looking at what might possibly happen in the future; it is addressing real issues of today ranging from the Health Service Information Technology (IT) Project to ID cards and information security. Over the last twenty five years PITCOM has attracted membership beyond the confines of Westminster and today includes many of the best known corporate names in the IT and communications world as well as respected experts from academia and elsewhere.

Our meetings are a fascinating insight into emergent technologies and we try to be mindful of the need to communicate in 'non-techie' language. The world of acronyms in the IT industry is frightening enough and puts off many a good Parliamentarian and many feel they would be out of their depth because of the complexity of much of the underlying science.

PITCOM has reached this important milestone with the support of many people both in the House and beyond. I want to thank a number of people, not least of whom are my fellow officers and their predecessors who had such vision. I hope that all of our external members who have contributed so much to help Parliament understand complex issues also feel they have benefited by their involvement with us.

Our challenge now is to make sure we help inform debate in Parliament for the next twenty five years!

Andrew Miller MP
Chairman, PITCOM

A ministerial view of PITCOM from Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP, Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Stephen Timms

PITCOM is a unique forum, bringing together Parliamentarians and the IT industry. I owe PITCOM a lot, and it is a pleasure to contribute to this celebration of its 25th anniversary. In my new Cabinet position as Chief Secretary, I want IT to make the best possible contribution to public service efficiency and improvement. Lessons from PITCOM will be at the forefront of my thinking.

I was elected in 1994 after 16 years in the IT industry, and made a beeline for PITCOM. The speed of technological progress adds special importance to its role as a bridge between industry and legislators. I was closely involved – latterly as Treasurer – until appointed a minister in summer 1998.

I particularly enjoyed the study tours to the USA and Canada, and to Sweden, Finland and Germany, all superbly organised by Frank Richardson. They provided great access to senior industry figures and legislators. I was impressed by Canada's pioneering Internet use in schools – a useful insight when I became schools minister in 2001. Lessons from the later Canadian success on extending broadband access – and renewing contacts from the PITCOM visits – were important for me as e-commerce minister in 2002–4.

I arrived at the DTI in the week Sarah Arnott reported in Computing that, on broadband, the UK was neck and neck with Croatia! And my campaign to increase access was greatly strengthened by enthusiastic and committed support from PITCOM – Andrew Miller, Brian White, Ian Taylor, Richard Allan and others in Parliament, and many in industry too.

That campaign was an important success for UK public policy. On that and other issues, PITCOM has played an important part – for example, bringing party and industry together at party conference fringe meetings every year. I look forward to PITCOM continuing to play its important role for many years to come.

An ex-Minister's view: from Ian Taylor MBE MP, Minister for Science and Technology at the DTI 1994–97

Ian Taylor MP

When I was Science & Technology Minister at the DTI, the amount of IT expertise or interest amongst Parliamentary colleagues was, dare I say it, limited. I had to seek out, with some difficulty, willing allies to help in what I was trying to achieve - in particular to expand awareness of the potential of ICT in the emerging internet world. Amongst these allies were PITCOM, its sister grouping EURIM, and the Space Committee. Michael Heseltine and I were trying to encourage government to be an early adopter of 'online' access with what we called government.direct, now known as e-government. We were also busy nudging the rest of the EU into liberalising and/or privatising their telcos, which we succeeded in doing. We needed all the help we could get, and we found it among the Parliamentary and corporate members of PITCOM and EURIM. Of course, Ministers are aware that too much interest from MPs can put one under scrutiny. But that is better than being ignored!

Since reverting to being a back bencher, my activities with PITCOM, EURIM and APIG have kept me abreast of what is going on in technology. During the 1998 study tour of Canada, we learnt how the Canadians had already set up commercial Broadband networks in several Provinces. We learn from what is happening elsewhere and can put pressure on UK operators to perform.

PITCOM has also played an important role in informing such diverse debates as on the creation of OFCOM, the implications of convergence, the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act, Government use of IT and on the way technology can help overcome some of the social divisions in our society.

Since 1997, I have watched the performance of my successors in the DTI with interest! Only Stephen Timms was allowed to stay in the job long enough to make a difference. That he was a PITCOM activist and treasurer before becoming a Minister is perhaps no coincidence.

What is needed in government is a Minister with the ability to grasp the implications of IT and with the drive to realise the opportunities across government departments and activities. This requires clout. I hope that an incoming Tory Government will take this to heart – at least we have now set up a Policy Task-force on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, which I have been asked to chair.

As a whole, I find the present government more 'comfortable' with technical issues than we were, but less co-ordinated or business-like in applying the opportunities. Looking back over what has been achieved by successive governments over 12 years, I am sad that government (with a small g) still has a tendency to think about what technology can do TO people rather than FOR people in matters like CCTV, ANPR, road-tolls and ID cards. We need to get the emphasis right.

PITCOM members now have to grapple with the implications of the global challenge from powerful and educated people in Asia, by whom more and more of the creative work will be done, if the UK fails to boost skills and re-skilling.

More than ever, the British government should show that it can use new technologies to advantage in delivery of policies (such as by satellite monitoring) and invest early in projects to recoup later benefits.
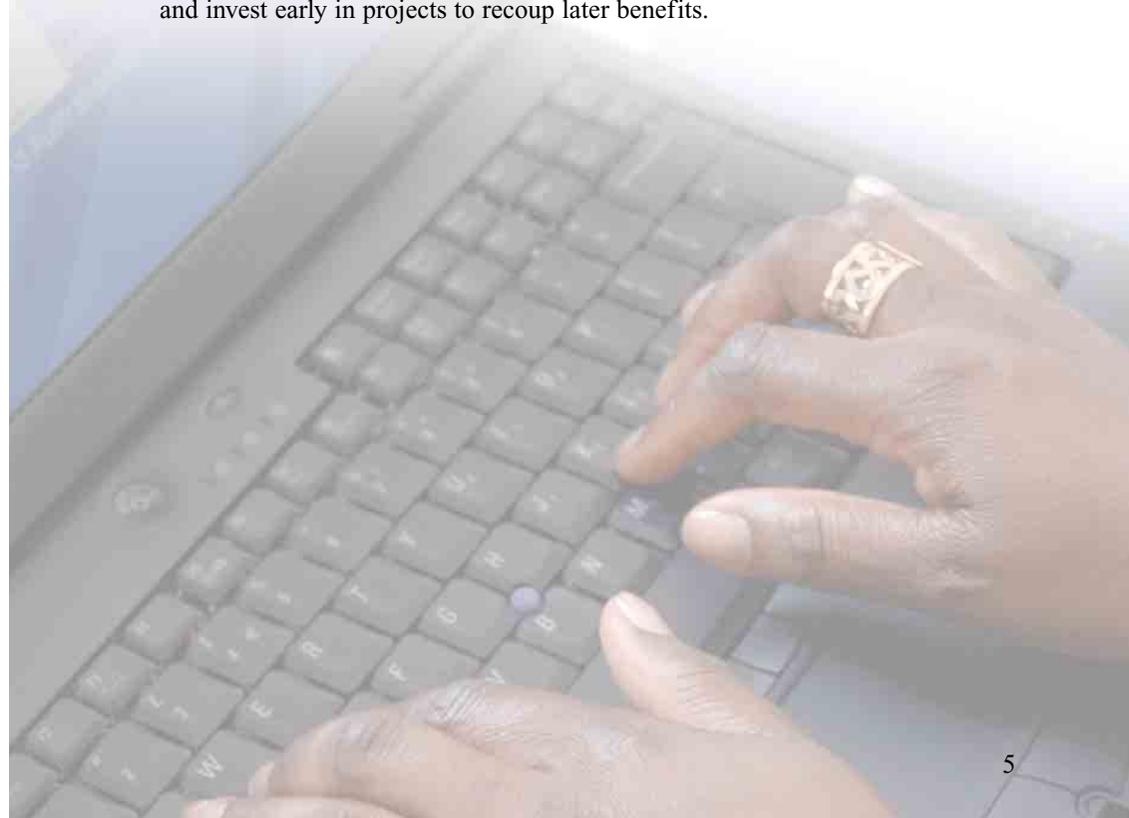
The founding of PITCOM, 21 January 1981

In the 1960s and '70s, IT policy had been focused on the maintenance of a viable British computer industry., with a focus on hardware, micro-electronics and robotics. But new ideas were emerging. Software was beginning to be seen as more important than hardware. Government had lost faith in its abilities to 'pick winners' among the IT suppliers.

PITCOM was formed in January 1981 by the merger of the All Party IT Committee of MPs and the industry-funded Parliamentary Computer Forum. But the origins go back to 1978.

In January 1978, on the Conservative side, a Bow Group team who had written a paper about the importance of software got together with a group from the computer and telecoms industry, to create the Conservative Computer Forum. Its first task was to persuade the party that the subjects merited a policy.

In March 1978 James Callaghan watched a Horizon Programme 'Now the Chips are Down' and called for a TUC study on the implications for jobs and what Government should do.

Shortly afterwards Sir Keith Joseph asked Ian Lloyd MP to lead a team to look at policy towards the microelectronics revolution, computing and telecommunications. Ian's research assistants were Adrian Norman, (co-author with James Martin of 'The Computerized Society', almost the only published thinking in this space) and Philip Virgo.

As a result, in 1979 the DTI briefs for incoming Ministers of both parties contained proposals for a major awareness campaign (IT Year), a 'Micros in Schools' Programme and Telecoms Liberalisation. The main difference was the nature of duopoly. The Conservatives would have privatised Post Office Telecoms and Cable and Wireless, and be seeking to create a fully competitive market. Labour would have focussed on shrinking the Post Office monopoly powers while promoting Cable and Wireless as an international champion.

After the election Ian Lloyd led the creation of the All Party IT Committee and started working towards creating a UK equivalent of the US Office of Science and Technology. To help that process the industry supporters of the Conservative Computer Forum, who had always included non-conservatives working with all parties, created the Parliamentary Computer Forum to run briefing sessions for MPs on topics of current interest. The Forum aimed to run sessions shortly ahead of subjects hitting the headlines and circulate a two-page digest to all MPs.

In parallel, Ian Lloyd had been in discussion with Arthur Butler, who ran the administration for the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and he was contracted to provide the administration. Not surprisingly, PITCOM was shaped on much the same model as the PSC, the oldest of the All-Party groups, dating back to 1939.

Along with PITCOM, according to Adrian Norman, four pieces of the 'machinery of government': a Minister for IT, an interdepartmental committee, a Cabinet Office 'IT Unit' and an IT Advisory Panel, were put in place at the same time. This machinery was to have links with universities, the military, industry, other OECD countries and EU Member States. Variations of this basic infrastructure have been in place ever since.

Sir Ian Lloyd sees the foundation of PITCOM to be 'an acceptance by both Houses and all parties that IT was not a party, but a national concern, and that there must be very few areas of policy that are not influenced by, if not significantly dependent upon, IT'. His aim in forming PITCOM was twofold: 'to ensure that Parliament as an institution was well informed about IT progress in an age increasingly dominated by science and technology, and to make IT an indispensable instrument for providing information to Members themselves.' To this end, Sir Ian persuaded the House of Commons library to install its first computer, at a time when the first PCs were appearing on the market.

The founding of PITCOM shows what a small but disparate group of MPs, industrialists, technologists, academics, ex-civil servants and consultants can do if they set their mind to it.

What's in a name?

In 1980, the merger working party rejected the following names:

PAPRICA	Parliamentary all-Party Robotics, Infomatics and Computing Group
PIG	Parliamentary Informatics Group
AGIT	All-Party Group for Information Technology
PITS	Parliamentary Information technology Society
PAP-MICRO	Parliamentary All-party Micro-electronic, Informatics, Computing and Robotics Organisation

Timeline 1981–2006

Year	Parliament Event	PITCOM Event	Industry Event
1981		PITCOM formed. Ian Lloyd MP Chairman	Government rescues ICL
1982	IT year. Duopoly Bill.	Seminar: Freedom of Broadcasting	IBM PC launched, with Microsoft OS
1983	General Election Conservative		1st Cable licences issued. Internet starts in Europe
1984	1st Data Protection Act. Telecommunications Act	Frank Richardson, Admin. Secretary	1st GUI computer (Apple Macintosh) launched. End of BT network monopoly
1985			Vodaphone & Cellnet licensed
1986			Wapping printers' strike
1987	General Election Conservative. Telecommunications (Fraud Act)	Sir Michael Marshall MP, Chairman Study tour: Texas	
1988	Hansard on the Web		
1989	Warren report on IT	PITCOM hosted launch of 'Women into IT'	Launch of the World Wide Web
1990	Review of BT/Mercury duopoly. Computer Misuse Act		ICL taken over by Fujitsu Satellite TV (BskyB) Microsoft Windows 3
1991	Police IT Organisation		GSM licences granted. Cable TV and telephony started
1992	General Election Conservative		
1993		1st Fringe meeting, Labour only	
1994	Parliamentary Data and Video Network installed. Data Protection Act	Fringe meetings Labour and Conservative. EURIM launched	
1995	Broadcasting Act	Study tour of the USA Conference 'The politics of multimedia'	

Timeline 1981–2006 *cont.*

Year	Parliament Event	PITCOM Event	Industry Event
1996	1st Study tour of Canada		
1997	Telecommunications (Fraud) Act. Green Paper on *government.direct*. General Election Labour	John McWilliam MP Chairman. Study tour of Sweden, Finland and Germany. PITCOM Website	
1998	New Data Protection Act	Survey of use of IT by MPs. 2nd Study tour of Canada. Study tour to Paris	Digital Terrestrial Television launched. Google launched. Dot.com boom starts.
1999	Reform of House of Lords. White Paper on 'Modernising Government'.	Conference: 'Politics of the e-conomy'. Study tour to Japan	Tony Blair gives target of all Government services to be online by 2005. Millennium Bug scare
2000	E-envoy appointed. Electronic Communications Act. RIPA enacted	Study tour, California. PITCOM Journal on the Web	3G mobile auction nets £22bn. Dot.com crash. Gershon report
2001	General Election Labour. Central provision of IT for MPs		Gateway Reviews started. Cable and BT offer affordable Broadband services.
2002	1st webcast of Parliament debates		NHS National Plan for IT launched
2003	Communications Act		
2004		Chris Stewart Munro, Admin. Secretary	First mass market VOIP services
2005	General Election Labour. Freedom of Information Act	Andrew Miller MP Chairman	Transformational Government launched
2006	ID Card Act	25th Anniversary	

Some long-serving members and officers of PITCOM

Sir Ian Lloyd MP	Founder Chairman, 1981–87
Sir Michael Marshall MP	Vice-Chairman 1981–86, Chairman 1987–97
John McWilliam MP	Vice-Chairman 1984–1997, Chairman 1997–2005, (Deputy Speaker)
Andrew Miller MP	Vice Chairman 1997–2005, Chairman 2005–present
Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP	Treasurer 1997–98 (Min. DSS 1998–99, Financial Sec, Treasury 1999–2001, Min. DES 2001–2002, Min. e-commerce DTI 2002–04, Fin. Sec. Treasury 2005, Min. Pensions Reform 2005–06, Chief Sec. Treasury 2006–)
Ian Taylor MP MBE	Vice-Chairman 2001– present (Minister for Science & Technology, DTI 1994–97)
Roger Gale MP	Secretary 1999–present
Margaret Moran MP	Vice-Chair 2005–present
Lord Lloyd of Kilgerran	Vice-chair 1981–88
Lord Harris of Haringey	Treasurer 2005–present
Lord Renwick	Sec. 1991–99, Programme Exec. 2000–04, Vice President 2006
Viscount Craigavon,	Council Member 1981–present
Viscount Chelmsford	Council Member 1993–99
Gary Waller MP	Vice-Chairman 1987–97
Ian Bruce MP	Vice Chairman 2001
David Mathieson	Treasurer 1981–83
Simon Coombs MP	Treasurer 1987–97
Brian White MP	Treasurer 1998–05
Philip Virgo	Industry Vice-Chair 1981–02, Finance Executive 1983–05
Derek Broome	Programme Executive 1981-93
Adrian Norman	Programme Exec.1993–95 Council 1993–2003
Jim Brookes	Programme Executive 1995–2000
Charles Hughes	Programme Executive 2004–present
Richard Marriott	Membership Secretary 1981–86
Martin Hughes	Membership Executive 1990–present
Margaret Bell	Chair Editorial Board 1993–2005
Prof. Liz Bacon	Chair Communications Committee 2005–present
Arthur Butler	Administrative Secretary 1981–1984
Frank Richardson,	Administrative Secretary 1984–2004
Chris Stewart Munro	Administrative Secretary, 2004–present

Stability in a changing world

Three Chairmen: Sir Michael Marshall MP, Sir Ian Lloyd MP and John McWilliam MP

One of the curious things about PITCOM, is that, in the fast-moving world of technology and politics, its structures and personnel have remained remarkably stable over its 25 years. There have been only four Chairmen: Sir Ian Lloyd MP, Sir Michael Marshall MP, John McWilliam MP and Andrew Miller MP. Philip Virgo remained Finance Executive for the amazing span of 22 years. Frank Richardson was Administrative Secretary for 20 years. Derek Broome stayed as Programme Executive for 12 years. The PITCOM Journal had only four editors in its 24 years.

Andrew Miller MP, Chairman

This has meant that unlike the rest of the IT community, PITCOM has had a long corporate memory. This has its upside: that we know what works and what will inevitably fail. PITCOM avoids the flights of fashion and the blandishments of hype, unlike the rest of the IT industry. We were not carried away by the 'dot.com' boom.

There is a downside to this 'seen it all before' stance. We do not always grasp the full impact of technologies that came over the horizon, like PCs in the early '80s. We did not foresee the Internet and the Web or the power of search engines to change the world.

International study tours

From 1995 until 2000, PITCOM's Parliamentary members extended their contacts outside the UK. Delegations of Parliamentary members visited Washington, New York, San Francisco, Houston, Sacramento, Ottawa, Toronto, Halifax (Nova Scotia), St John (NW Brunswick, Tokyo, Paris, Brussels, Stockholm, Helsinki, Bonn and Frankfurt.

Every tour gave surprising new insights to the travellers, and gave them a bechmark against which to measure the UK's strengths and weaknesses.

In 1995, the Parliamentarians visited AT&T in New Jersey, NYNEX in New York and various Government departments in Washington. They learnt that the American Telecoms industry and the government were so busy resolving "a multi-corner domestic debate involving the Executive, Senate, Congress, Federal Communications Commission, Justice Department, *et al*, plus a multiplicity of corporations and interest groups, that they have no time for a global vision of the future of telecoms."

John McWilliam MP tests a voice-activated system at the NYNEX Laboratories. Sir Michael Marshall MP, Bill Olner MP, Viscount Chelmsford and John McWilliam MP

In 1997, in Scandinavia and Germany, they learnt – Humility: "Northern Europe has already learned more from our mistakes than we have left to tell them from our achievements".Telecoms and web- penetration are further ahead in Scandinavia than in America or the UK. The tour prompted Philip Virgo to ask "Are regulated Global Players the best driver, or is it local enterprise, including municipal enterprise?"

In the Chamber of the Finnish Parliament. Jim Brookes, Viscount Craigavon, Philip Virgo, Ian Bruce MP, Stephen Timms MP, John McWilliam MP, Bill Olner MP, Brian White MP, Richard Page MP, Nick Hawkins MP, Frank Richardson, Viscount Chelmsford

In Paris in April 1998, they found themselves in a country where liberalisation and privatisation had only just begun, several years behind the UK.

In Canada, in October 1998, they learned that industry, academia and government had realised that if Canada were to compete effectively with its large neighbour to the south, they would have to work together to create a Broadband society. Already, a year before the PITCOM visit, the telcos and cable companies of the Provinces of the Eastern seaboard had launched low-cost Broadband services running up to 10mbs, a 3- to 5-year jump on the UK.

In Tokyo, in 1999, to everyone's surprise, the PITCOM travellers found that the Japanese wanted to learn from us about how we managed regulation in a liberalised market and managed the shifts in global markets from hardware to services.

At NBTel's main exchange in St John, New Brunswick. John McWilliam MP, NBTel, Richard Page/MP, Ian Stewart MP, Ian Bruce MP, Lord Renwick, Brian White MP, NBTel, Ian Taylor MP, Margaret Moran MP, Richard Sarson, Margaret Bell

At the Headquarters of Toshiba, Tokyo. Front Row: Roger Gale MP, Lord Renwick, John McWilliam MP, Andrew Miller MP, Ian Bruce MP, Ian Stewart MP

In California, in 2000, they learned that, even in Silicon Valley, opening a government portal is doing no more than putting "lipstick on the face of a pig", if the civil servants are not behind the move. They detected that "we are on the brink of a switch from proprietary standards to open access for software and services, that will change the structure and nature of the Internet, and also the business models of many players." In California, they found a culture gap between the Bay Area and the rest of America, let alone the rest of the world.

Visit to the Californian State Legislature, Sacramento. Ian Taylor MP, John McWilliam MP, Philip Virgo, Richard Page MP, Andrew Miller MP, Frank Richardson, Margaret Moran MP, Brian White MP

Conferences and Exhibitions

From the start, PITCOM has organised conferences for MPs and Whitehall. The themes reflect the interests of the times.

In 1981, the first one was on Education, Training and IT. This involved 14 machines running separate applications in the upper waiting room of the Commons, manned by relays of children from 40 schools. The House Authorities had never tried anything like this before and might have blocked any repeat. But, at the time, it was massively successful, being attended by over 120 MPs, and put Computers in Schools on the political agenda.

In 1982, during 'IT Year', the topic was Freedom in Broadcasting, which opened up the discussion of the possibilities of cable and satellite broadcasting. The seminar was rated important enough to be addressed by William Whitelaw, then Home Secretary, accompanied by Kenneth Baker – two cabinet Ministers in one room. PITCOM was riding the crest of a wave.

In 1986, an IT Skills Shortages Seminar hosted by IBM and organised with the NCC and the IT Skills Agency brought together all the players of the day and flushed out the issues in a way that, in Philip Virgo's eyes, has never happened before or since.

In 1989, there was a seminar on the 'Broadband Revolution', 12 years before the cable companies and BT launched their affordable Broadband services in the UK.

At a conference in 1993 on 'The emerging Information Society', the problems around inter-departmental data sharing were aired, 12 years before Ian Watmore's blueprint for 'Transformational government'.

A conference in 1995, 'The Politics of Multimedia', echoing All Gore's American vision, trumpeted the coming of the information superhighway and the brave new world it would bring. Peter Cochrane, then of BT, poured some cold water on this, pointing out that for several years all we would have is an information footpath. He proved to be right. The keynote speech, by Ian Taylor, then Minister of Science and Technology, lifted the curtain on e-government.

More recently, PITCOM's conference activity has dropped off, perhaps because various blockbuster 'UK IT Summits' incorporate policy streams and topics at one time only dealt with by PITCOM.

After every General Election from 1987 onwards PITCOM organised exhibitions of IT equipment and services for Parliamentarians.

Visits and morning presentations

Although the formal evening meetings (page 18) have always been the flagship events for PITCOM's corporate members, the morning presentations for Parliamentarians and visits to organisations like Oftel, the Royal Botanic Society at Kew or the Association of Geographic Information, have given MPs and Peers a deeper insight into specific aspects of IT. The Oftel visits attracted a particularly high turn out from MPs and Peers in the years after 1994, when BT was privatised, and Parliamentarians were curious to know whether the new world was going to succeed. There were annual presentations by BT, Mercury and Cable & Wireless, fighting their corner in the new world. Smaller companies did not get much of a look-in, which was a pity, because it was a time when small innovative software, mobile telephony and cable companies were beginning to make headway against the older mammoths. These visits were sometimes quite far away, like Martlesham or Goonhilly Down in Cornwall. These visits have dropped off in recent years, time pressure on Parliamentarians, particularly since the change in Parliament's working hours, have made it difficult for them to escape the Westminster village.

Fringe meetings

In 1993 PITCOM started holding fringe meetings at the party conferences. This started with Labour, and then the Conservatives followed the next year. From 1998, the Liberal Democrat conference was added to the circuit. These fringe meetings usually attracted 60-90 party activists.

The speakers at the Fringe Meetings are usually Trade Ministers or Shadow Trade Ministers. Very often, Party shuffles happen at the end of the summer, and so the Fringe meetings were often the first outings for new ministers in front of an audience of real people. So, visitors to PITCOM's fringe meetings could size them up before than anyone else in the country. In 1999, Patricia Hewitt, newly appointed DTI Minister, used the PITCOM fringe to call for a culture shift in the Civil Service, to implement the e-government programme for which she had just become responsible.

From 1999 until 2005 the most contentious part of all the fringe meetings was not political, or related to whatever topic had been chosen as the subject of the speeches, but was an attack from the floor on the telecom operators, and to a lesser extent the government, about the slow rate of roll-out of Broadband across the country. For the first time, an IT grievance had become the top of the agenda for party workers from all the political parties.

In 2006, PITCOM will not be holding fringe meetings at the party conferences.

The Monday evening meetings

At the heart of PITCOM's activities since 1981 are the Monday evening meetings, usually held in Committee Room 10 of the House of Commons. The pattern of meetings, with two or three non-Parliamentary speakers with contrasting views, followed by a debate, continues unchanged from the beginning of PITCOM.

Originally, Government Ministers responded to the debates when appropriate. In the first few years, as many as four Ministers, often of Cabinet rank, used to attend evening meetings in the course of a year. In the last decade, that has dropped to one or two.

Over the years, PITCOM has been addressed by one Nobel Laureate (Arno Penzias), three Data Protection Registrars (Eric Howe, Elizabeth France and Richard Thomas), one European Commissioner (Michel Carpentier), three Directors General of Oftel (Brian Carsberg, Don Cruickshank and David Edmonds) an e-envoy (Andrew Pinder) and two government CIOs (Ian Watmore and John Suffolk). Among figures from industry are Sir David Brown of Motorola and Tim Holley of Camelot.

The topics covered have changed in the last 25 years. The early years were dominated by the liberalisation of the telecoms industry, and data protection, in the run up to the 1984 Data Protection Act. In the early 1980s, Government funded research was at the top of the agenda, as a counter to the perceived threat of the Japanese "5th generation". PITCOM members oiled the wheels of the Alvey Research programme and the EC equivalent, ESPRIT. Curiously, Europe and its IT programmes seem to have dropped off PITCOM's radar in the last five years.

In 1993, Digital Radio and Television became a well worn subject for PITCOM, about 9 years before Digital services started being rolled out.

In 1995, two evening meetings challenged the conflicting roles of the regulators in broadcasting and telecommunications, eight years before the formation of Ofcom. Some PITCOM members claim that the seed of Ofcom was germinated in these two meetings.

More recently, security, policing, terrorism and e-crime figure more often. We had our first smart card debate, which included consideration of ID cards in 1999, seven years before the ID Card Bill finally got through the Parliamentary process. And of course many technologies covered recently were not around in the early years: mobile phones, the GSM standard for mobile telephones, the World Wide Web, RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) and VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). In 1997 we were among the first to warn that the Millennium bug could become a major threat.

Since 2000, public sector computer disasters became a large concern, as recurring disasters clouded the perception of IT among MPs and the wider public. Originally, PITCOM took the disasters quietly, thinking them a temporary blip, which could easily be cured by better project management, and more vetting along the line with Sir Peter Gershon's "Gateway Reviews". A darker mood is setting in, as the disasters continue, the National Audit Office becomes more critical, and other MPs more impatient.

E-democracy became an important topic around election time in 1997 and 2001, culminating with a debate in June 2001 led by Bob Worcester of MORI and Stephen Coleman, then of the Hansard Society. But in the years since, e-democracy became muted, as the e-voting experiments did not help to raise voting rates.

Another change is that from 2001–05, the PITCOM choice of topics became more tightly focussed on the Parliamentary agenda. This seems to have loosened somewhat to admit new disruptive technologies, like VOIP and RFID, whose political impact has not yet crystallised.

Some evergreen topics, however recur down the years. Skills and education is one, depending on the booms and slumps in the industry. Intellectual Property Rights is another, as is Health. It could be argued that a visit to St Thomas's Hospital in 1998 and evening meetings on health care in 1999 and 2000 alerted PITCOM's Parliamentarians to the danger that the NHS 'bottom up' culture made it impossible to keep pace with technology. This eased, for better or worse, the early acceptance by MPs of the NHS National Plan for IT. The failures of national or European public procurement methods are another perennial.

None of these failures ever seem to get solved, as PITCOM's older and grumpier members are happy to point out. During the '90s, one of the enjoyable features of the debates on the floor were carefully crafted and elegant questions or comments from David Firnberg and Adrian Norman, pointing out to the speakers that the particular problem they thought was new had in fact been on the agenda for about thirty years.

Chairing the Programme Committee is about the most important and difficult job in PITCOM. First you have to choose a topic, which is at once technologically important, is coming down the political track, and, most important of all, will

attract non-techie MPs and Peers. At the same time, the chairman must not ignore more slow-burning subjects for debate. One of the strengths of PITCOM down the years has been to pick technologies just coming over the horizon, and tease out their political impact.

The next task for the Programme Committee is to choose speakers who are eminent enough to be names known to MPs, but not so eminent that they are just figureheads, and therefore not masters of the topic under debate. Then the Programme Committee has to persuade the speakers that they must not grind axes, but must handle the political fall-out from the technology, not the technology itself.

The years ahead will be very testing for the Programme Committee, as new disruptive technologies transform the IT scene. at the same time as the Government is trying to change the shape of the Public Sector with its Transformational Government initiative. PITCOM has work to do.

'IT and Public Policy', the PITCOM Journal

The history of the PITCOM journal has followed the history of the use of IT in publishing. It started as a lengthy paper journal, and has evolved over the past 25 years into a wholly web-based periodical. The content has gone through a parallel shift, from a discussion on what IT policy should be all about, to a tight focus on today's hot IT topics.

The first issue of 'IT and Public Policy' came out in September 1982 as a 4-monthly, 70-page magazine. The editor was Brian Murphy. He, and the founders of PITCOM, intended the Journal to 'stimulate more and better discussion of IT issues than has so far found its way into print', by providing reports on the speeches made at the PITCOM meetings, and give transcripts of Parliamentary debates and questions, which covered IT developments. The first article was on the Government's proposals for Data Protection, and for cable networks. Brian Murphy also wrote an article comparing government policy in France, Germany and the UK towards their native computer companies.

After Brian Murphy died suddenly in 1988, he was succeeded as editor by Kate Norman, PITCOM pioneer and wife of another. She continued with a wide-ranging spread of contributed articles, as well as PITCOM material. The result is a treasure trove for historians of IT in the UK. The cost of the magazine was defrayed by advertisements.

Until 1995, the Parliamentary section of the Journal had been laboriously transcribed by Pat Richardson, Frank Richardson's wife, from the pages of Hansard. In 1988, Hansard appeared for the first time on the Web, and Richard Sarson, who took over as editor from Kate Norman in 1995, used the web technology to search for the IT content and download it.

In the next few years, we branched out into doing supplements on the public policy of Geographic Information with the AGI, and on e-Commerce with e-Centre.

In 2000, the advertisers disappeared with the dot.com crash, and a slimmed-down Journal was hosted as a monthly by Parlicom, the publishers of the 'House Magazine', who also posted the Journal on its Website. In 2002, a similar arrangement was made with Kable Ltd, and the Journal started appearing in its 'Government Computing' magazine. In 2003, Kable's Mark Say took over as Editor.

From 2006, the Journal will no longer appear on paper. It is being merged with the pitcom.org.uk Website, and will contain short in-depth briefings, dubbed

'PITcomms', on the political fall-out from new technologies. Writing these 'PITcomms' has been entrusted to Dan Jellinek and Derek Parkinson of Headstar Ltd.

The new pitcom.org.uk website was designed and is operated by Chris Histed of PublicTechnology.net.

PITCOM has now realised the wish of Viscount Chelmsford, a member of the Editoriial Board in the 1990s,

Reducing paper is our aim,
We hear the IT men proclaim;
Yet when they put this into prose,
Their use of paper is verbose;
Instead of halving what is used,
The tree gets doubly abused.
Oh for the skilful written brief
On two short pages – for relief.
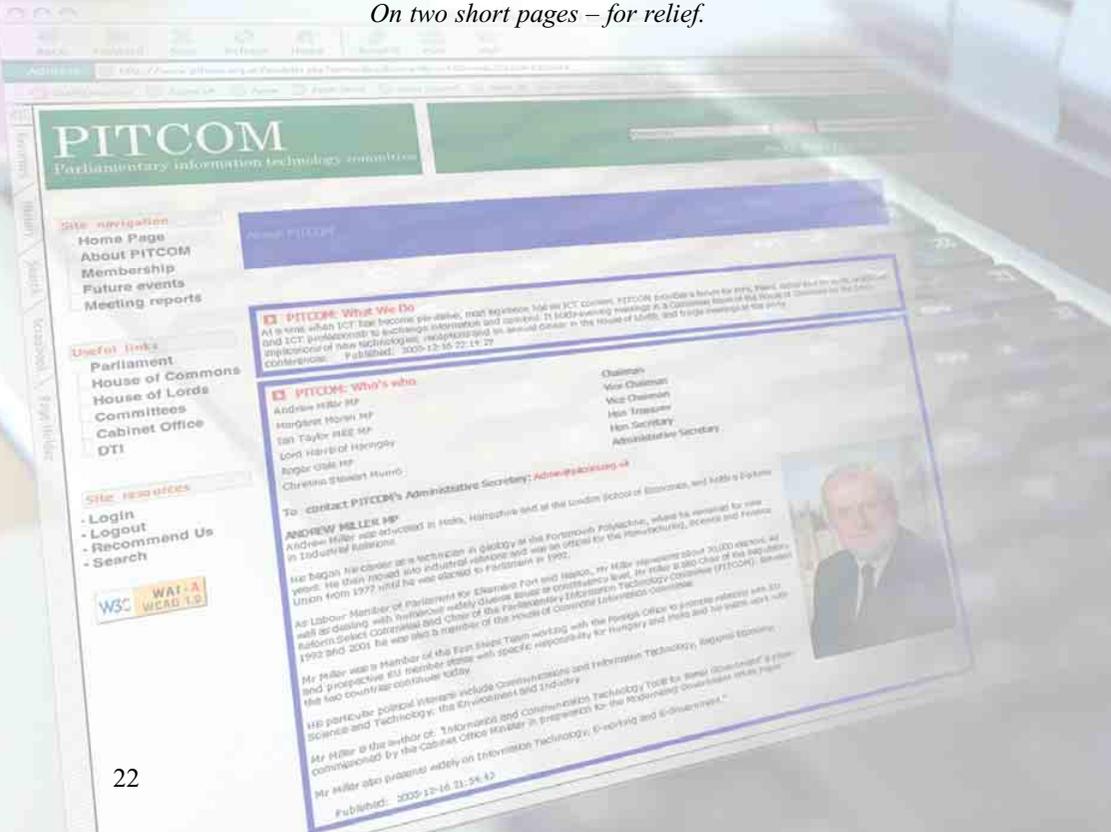
Government's changing attitude to IT

The Conservative government designated 1982 as 'IT Year', and the fledgling PITCOM rode in on the wave. Margaret Thatcher herself spoke in the IT Year closing conference at the Barbican in December. It seemed as if IT had arrived.

Adrian Norman claims that the early days show "how much could be achieved by a small network of people interested in the political implications of IT. Most of their usual contacts and associates knew IT (science, technology, industry, micro-economics) or politics (law, macro-economics, government, international relations) but not both. I doubt if there were more than a dozen of us in the UK able to bridge the gap until PITCOM began to lift the curtain between the two sides. In typical British fashion, we advanced by stealth."

But, from around 1985, although the government pressed ahead with the largest shake-up of telecoms that the country has ever seen, when Government ministers came to respond to PITCOM debates, they tended to reject any pleas for support of initiatives in other branches of IT. What they were doing was letting the market push the agenda.

The market then delivered the IT, as the Government intended, but also opened a Pandora's box: crime, threats to liberty, pornography, financial crashes, haves and have-nots, piracy, jurisdictional disputes and market dominance. But it did not find a way to help most MPs answer their worries about these problems. Since then, it has been PITCOM's task to fill the gap, and worry effectively.

In the last years of the Conservative government, all changed again. Michael Heseltine became Deputy Prime Minister, and chose to knock together the heads of his Departmental colleagues and their Permanent Secretaries to do more joined-up government. IT benefited from this. Several Departments combined to launch the government.direct in 1997, which was, paradoxically, to become the kernel of the incoming Labour Government's e-government agenda after 1997.

Although Tony Blair confesses to be himself computer illiterate, he has driven personally the e-government programme, and gave the public sector the 2005 deadline of getting their services online. No previous Prime Minister ever did this.

The day after the Queen's speech in November 1999, the Guardian ran a cartoon of the Queen saying "My Government will prepare Britain as a dynamic, knowledge-based economy, will introduce a Bill to promote Electronic

Government and Electronic Commerce, improving one's ability to compete in the digital market place, and make one's own clothes." Every Queen's Speech generated more IT Bills.

IT no longer needed an advocate to urge change. The change was happening anyway. PITCOM's task was to study the consequences of the change, and look ahead to the next challenges coming round the corner.

PITCOM in Parliament

PITCOM was forged in the furnace of the Pariamentary debates on liberalising and privatising telecoms. From 1992, two of PITCOM's chairmen, Sir Michael Marshall and John McWilliam slugged it out toe to toe across the despatch box in the duopoly debates. At that time, PITCOM MPs voted with their parties on a divisive issue like privatisation. Not surprisingly, therefore, that when PITCOM was founded, there was a strict rule that PITCOM should not have an official view on anything. It was just a forum.

So it is impossible to try to list PITCOM's 'triumphs'. A forum can have no triumphs. However, there have been successes for PITCOM's Parliamentary members acting in concert to promote IT. In this sense, Philip Virgo believes that Oftel is PITCOM's baby – in the same way as Ofcom was to be EURIM's baby. In 1987, PITCOM backed the 'Women into IT' initiative, and persuaded Eric Forth, then Minister responsible for IT, and Hilary Armstong for the opposition, to support it. Ian Bruce's private member's 1997 Telecommunications (Fraud) Act was pushed through both Houses by PITCOM members on both sides of the House.

By 1994, it became clear that IT was a cause worth campaigning for, and some PITCOM members formed EURIM as a lobbying limited company, initially – in the words of Sir Leon Brittan, then Vice President of the European Commission – to "sink teeth into the soft underbelly of Brussels until effective action results". It then turned its Rottweiler treatment to Westminster, to become the 'military wing' (McWilliam rules) of PITCOM, tasked to cause things to happen without compromising the neutral stance of PITCOM.

The blooming of new All-Party IT groups

The 1997 General Election brought in a new wave of technically minded MPs with specific interests, like the Internet or e-democracy. The result was a flowering of new All Party Groups in the IT space. These reflected the spread of IT across most branches of human endeavour. The new groups increased the number of MPs exposed to expert opinion on the politics of IT. It also irritated some PITCOM members because it fragmented the voice of IT in Parliament. They saw the danger of IT becoming like health, where there are 64 medical All Party Groups. However, most PITCOM Parliamentarians responded by joining the other groups, thereby getting the best of all possible worlds. It also meant that the various groups tightened their focus on one area of the IT scene. In the 2001–05 Parliament, Brian White, then treasurer of PITCOM and Chairman of EURIM, worked to ensure informally that the APGs in which he was an office-holder did not trip over each others' feet.

The Groups have started to have joint meetings, on topics which are of interest to more than one Group. For instance in May 2006, PITCOM joined with the All-Party Group on Telecommunications for a debate on "the vulnerability of the infrastructure." In October 2006, PITCOM will be a stakeholder in a two day Conference on 'Parliament and the Internet', organised by the All-Party Internet Group (APIG). Also involved are the all-party groups for Mobiles and Telecommunications. An international dimension to this conference will be given by the EU Commission, the EU Internet Group and the Internet Caucus in Washington.

"The elected in pursuit of the electronic"

At the first meeting, PITCOM numbered 57 Parliamentary Members. The numbers rose to around 100 within five years. At the last count, in May 2006, the numbers were 94 MPs and 45 Peers. That more MPs have not joined since IT became pervasive across society and affects most legislation has been a puzzle. Surely, Parliamentarians without an IT background should seek guidance from those who have one? In January 2006, PITCOM devoted a meeting to the question "why MPs and Peers do not care about IT". The Earl of Erroll contended that "those who get into Parliament are good at verbal communications, but do not like to appear as introverted nerds and anoraks"! There are even MPs, some of them junior Ministers, with an IT background, who keep quiet about their expertise.

MPs have a reputation outside Westminster for being luddite. But in the summer of 1998, the PITCOM Journal and 'Government Computing' Magazine did a survey of MPs' use of IT, and six months later, the House Information Committee did a similar survey. The results were broadly comparable. Of the 366 MPs who responded to the Information Committee survey, 96% claimed to use IT in some form, either in their constituency or at Westminster. Even then, 178 of the 206 respondents to the PITCOM survey used the Internet, and 161 of them sent emails. Only 43 had websites, and some of these were Party or shared sites. The survey also revealed that it was usually the PA, not the MP, who operated the computer and surfed the net.

Despite these encouraging figures of computer use, in 2000, Margaret Moran MP remarked "If you want to find the 'Information Poor', you need to go no further than Westminster".

In 2001, this should all have changed. The House, prompted by the example of the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, agreed that the House should provide computers centrally to MPs. (Richard Allan, a PITCOM member, chaired the Information Committee at the time of its recommendation.) The change was accompanied by an expansion of the Parliamentary Network (originally set up in 1994). From then on, all MPs would have computers, and hopefully their hands-on experience would rouse their interest in IT policy.

This has not happened. Brian White blames the culture of the House, and points out that there is a big gap between pressing the right keys on a computer and understanding the intricacies and importance of IT policy.

In the " why don't MPs and Peers care about IT" debate, Richard Allan called for "a new language for the dialogue between technologists and decision makers: for the elected in pursuit of the electronic." Then, he suggested MPs will become less passive about technology. Allan put forward the suggestion that every Bill that has some IT content should have in its 'bundle' a technology assessment. PITCOM is about to offer such technology assessments, to be dubbed 'PITcomms', on its website. Sir Ian Lloyd, PITCOM's founder Chairman, was calling for the same assessments back in 1985. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

Look to the future, by Andrew Miller MP, Chairman

All around us we see more and more sophisticated applications of Information Technology (IT). Next time you get into your car, or put your plastic card into a hole in the wall, or make a simple phone call just think of the powerful systems that support things we take for granted. A generation of school children have now completed their education within the PC era and expectations for ever-more complex services continue at a pace.

That is the reality that will dominate the challenge for PITCOM in our second twenty five years.

Acting, as we do, as a bridge between Parliament and the IT and communications world, we face an ever more confusing and complex set of challenges in meeting our goals. We not only need better informed legislators who can understand how the nation can exploit the best of scientific endeavour, we also need people who can think through the consequences of its application in society. Data protection and privacy are of concern to many and, although fears are sometimes irrational, we do need checks and balances to ensure the citizen is adequately protected from either the state or an over zealous private data holder.

Our ambition is to engage with a wider circle of MPs and Peers in the future and to translate our work in to a more accessible form. We are following the model created by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology by producing member targeted briefings. We are also looking at ways of working closer with MPs at a constituency level and strengthening some of our academic links. Finally, we hope to partner with some of our 'sister' organisations in the House to address things jointly in areas of overlap.

If Britain is to continue its drive as a high tech, high wage economy Parliament will need well informed MPs. I am sure PITCOM will continue to play a part in achieving that objective and we hope you will join us and help us fulfil our goal.

Acknowledgments